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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION
BUREAU OF ANIMAL INDUSTRY

SUGGESTIONS FOR CARE AND REARING OF FERRETS 1/

INTRODUCTION

The raising of ferrets (*Mustela putorius nigripes*) in captivity for use in exterminating rats and for hunting rabbits 2/ has been practiced for many years.

In the study of various diseases of man and other animals, the ferret has been found valuable as a laboratory test animal. The use of ferrets as test animals greatly exceeds that for any other purpose.

FOOD

Ferrets are carnivorous and develop best when fed a ration containing meat or meat products. In addition to any of the numerous prepared commercial fur-animal feeds available on the market, fresh meat, including glandular portions, should be fed at least twice a week. Once a day feeding is sufficient for adult animals. Females with large litters of young should be fed twice daily and provision made for feeding of the young separately from the mother at an early age. The young will often start taking solid food by the time their eyes are open. Food in semi-liquid form should be supplied to the young and may consist of bread and milk. Overfeeding with resultant storage and spoilage must be avoided. Food and water utensils must be kept clean.

PENS

Ferrets prefer clean dry quarters with opportunity to obtain fresh air and sunshine. The pen may be constructed of wire netting (not larger than 1 inch mesh for the floor) or of wood. A nest box of such construction as to give protection against excessive cold and extreme heat should be provided. If extensive production of ferrets is contemplated, a special building with nest boxes inside and a part of the runway outside is recommended.

1/ Formerly Wildlife Leaflet 286 issued by the Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior.

2/ Illegal in most States except for control of nuisance animals in orchards.

REPRODUCTION

With proper management, including feeding and early weaning of the first litter, two litters of young can often be raised each year. First appearances of oestrus in the female is shown by swelling of the vulva. This may occur in warm climates as early as March 15. The period of heat usually lasts three or more days, during which time the male will be accepted. If the first matings are unsuccessful, oestrus will usually re-occur in about two weeks. In mating it is advisable to take the female to the male's pen at least twice during the time the female is in heat. The period of gestation is 42 days. The young are usually born in May or June, and the number in a litter ranges from 4 to 10. The production of a second successful litter is directly related to early weaning of the first.

HEALTH

Maintenance of good health is largely dependent upon cleanliness and wholesome food. Ferrets are susceptible to few diseases, but must be kept free from canine distemper infection and a mange condition often described as "foot rot." Isolation from dogs is recommended to prevent distemper infection, and regular treatment of any mange condition of the skin must be practiced. The most common sites of the mange infection are the feet and ears. Any crusty thickening of the skin at these or other points should be treated with an ointment of 1 percent lime sulphur powder in petrolatum or a few drops of a 5 percent solution of DDT in acetone. Sick animals should be removed from the herd and isolated.

Young ferrets can be easily trained to submit to handling. Care should be exercised in lifting them by gently grasping them around the neck and chest.

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